

# CULTURED

## PETER SHIRE ADDS LOCAL COLOR

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Installation view of Peter Shire's "A Survey of Ceramics: 1970s to the Present" at Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

The door of Peter Shire's first ceramics studio, in Los Angeles, opened directly onto the sidewalk. He moved in 1972, three years after graduating from the Chouinard Art Institute, and soon discovered that the corner of Echo Park Avenue where his studio was located was also where the members of the local gang (the Echo Park Locos) regularly hung out.

"All the guys would come in the studio," Shire recalls, in his current, much larger studio a few blocks down the street. "They were a little younger than me but not by much. They'd see me doing stuff, and they'd doodle on my boards. I thought, If they're doing my thing, I'll do their thing."

So Shire began inscribing his ceramic cups and teapots with the gang's tag: ExP. Echo Park Pottery was born, a studio that Shire still maintains today. His distinctive tricolored mugs, with outlandishly shaped but surprisingly comfortable handles, have become collectible.



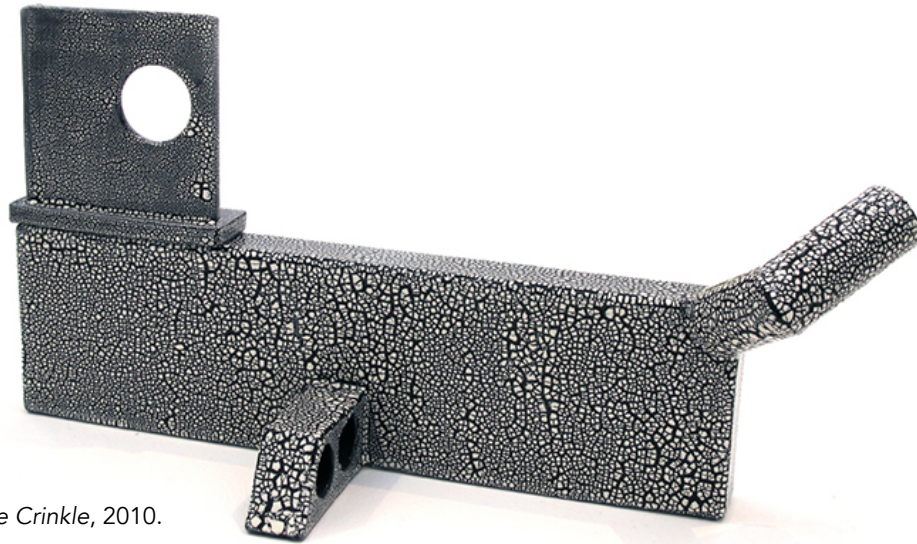
Peter Shire's *Magnet*, 2000.

Echo Park Pottery is just one department of Shire's boundlessly prolific artistic practice. He is perhaps most widely recognized as the only American member who participated every year in Memphis, the Italian design group founded by Ettore Sottsass in 1980. Memphis is notorious for its jazzy patterned laminates and flamboyant, asymmetrical shapes. Similarly, Shire's 1982 multicolored Bel Air chair has a back shaped like a shark's fin and is supported on one side by a large, painted wooden sphere. "I like what's funny," says Shire. "And what's funny is often what's insulting." His designs for Memphis in the 1980s were like raspberries blown in the face of good taste. Nevertheless, he ascribes to traditional values of quality and craftsmanship. "What I am trying to do is to make something of value, of beauty, of worth," he says.

Currently at New York's Jewish Museum is the exhibition "Masterpieces & Curiosities: Memphis Does Hanukkah," which was organized around a menorah made by Shire. His Hanukkah Lamp, Menorah # 7 (1986), which resembles a frozen explosion of anodized and chrome metal forms,

was made at the suggestion of his friend Marvin Zeidler, who the artist jokes was “worried about my Jewish soul.”

Shire is best described as an artist who has designed functional objects as well as gallery art and public commissions. While Shire’s furniture has a sculptural identity, he also makes sculptures that are interactive and useful. All across L.A. there are civic monuments by Shire, including his red and lime-green NoHo Gateway (2009), which spans across Lankershim Boulevard in North Hollywood, and the hanging steel sculptures including angels and a unicyclist that amuse commuters in the Wilshire/Vermont metro station.



Peter Shire's *Sake Crinkle*, 2010.

L.A. has a long tradition of transgressing boundaries between fine and applied arts. Before Shire, Peter Voulkos and Ken Price made ceramics into art. For Shire, the distinction was moot. At Chouinard, he says, “The painting and sculpture students were the most boring bunch. The fun people were the design and fashion students.” From then on, Shire ploughed his own furrow, creating a hybrid career that is increasingly influential on a younger generation of artists. This fall, Derek Eller Gallery mounted a retrospective exhibition of Shire’s teapots and cups from the 1970s to the present. The oldest work looked every bit as radical as the most recent.

In summing up his aesthetic, Shire says, “I wouldn’t quite call it Pop, but you might call it post-Eames,” referring to the famous Angeleno designers. He has never incorporated commercial imagery, as the Pop artists did. “I’m too much of a snob! I don’t care for the middle,” he says. “I want to be exciting. That’s what Memphis was all about. It will never be mainstream.”